

Notes on the Historical Significance of the Blackstone Valley

**“I understand you taught us how to spin..” President Andrew Jackson**

**“Yes Sir. I suppose I gave out the psalm and they have been singing to the tune ever since.” Samuel Slater**

*One:* This is where the cotton industry in America began. It’s a story that has its origins in Derbyshire, England, as the young Samuel Slater learned the intricacies of Richard Arkwright’s revolutionary new form of cotton spinning. With the backing of the Providence merchants, Brown & Almy and with the assistance of skilled carpenters, metal workers, clock-makers, and leather-workers, Slater built the first mechanized cotton-mill at Pawtucket Falls in 1790. In 1793, he built a new mill, part of which is now the Slater Mill Historic Site, a National Landmark.

From Pawtucket, the new “factory system” spread north into the Blackstone Valley – to Valley Falls, to Slatersville, to Manville, to Woonsocket, to Blackstone and Uxbridge, and far beyond the confines of the Valley. The new mills brought with them the need for worker housing, the re-routing of rivers, the building of dams, of raceways, of reservoir systems – and, on occasion, churches and community halls.

To understand the cotton economy is to understand a significant facet of American history. Cotton mills required cotton. The American South obliged, and an ugly, archaic system of slave labor earned a new lease on life and ultimately led to the tragedy of the Civil War and in no small fashion to the tragedy of American race relations. The cotton mills themselves became the incubators of a new discipline of work, driven by clock-time

and the pace of machinery. It would not take long before the classic battles of industrial labor and management would find their first home in the Valley. The Pawtucket strike of 1824 was one of the first in the nation.

The system of family labor developed in the Valley has long been known as the Rhode Island system. It is an argument that gives Rhode Island both too much importance and too little. The industrial labor of families – of men, women, and children – was the American norm in textile communities throughout the nation and for more than a century. The exception – known as the Lowell system, or the Waltham-Lowell system – was just that, an exception. Lowell has great importance in American history, but its reliance on a work-force of young, single women was both exceptional and short-lived, lasting only 25 or so years. The mills of the Blackstone not only set the “Rhode Island” pattern, but the “American” pattern.

The mills were also the scene of the great American drama of immigrant succession. Some came, like the English, with factory experience; most, came like the Yankees before them, newly loosened from the rhythms of rural life. And so the Irish, the French-Canadians, Poles, Italians, Greeks, and many others learned habits of work, of community, of conflict in the Valley’s mills and mill villages.

The cotton economy extended beyond the mills, to the “sweat shops,” of New York and the knitting mills of New Hampshire and Pennsylvania, leading both to harsh labor conditions and the trade union response and to a world of bright, inexpensive clothing,

the rise of great department stores, and a consumer revolution that would convert textiles – often the most valuable possession in 18<sup>th</sup>-century probate inventories to just another throw-away item. The very nature of the cotton economy, low in capital requirements, labor-intensive, inevitably driving down prices, made capital flight easy, as the industry moved to the American South, and then further south, to Columbia, and on to China and Vietnam. The story of cotton is the story of a singular commodity of great historical, regional, and global importance – and it began in the Blackstone Valley.

*Two:* No other mill valley has the density of mills and mill villages, many of which remain in their original condition, others altered in ways that are themselves historically significant. Included, of course, in the historic fabric are the dams, the raceways, the control gates, the surviving wheel houses, almost all fitted out with turbines, and the Blackstone Canal and the rail lines connecting Worcester to Providence.

The architecture of the mills and mill houses has long been respected by architects and architectural historians. The wood, ashlar, and brick mills with their bell towers and turrets are no longer regarded as “satanic.” Indeed the embrace of high ceilings, wood flooring, brick interior walls and proximity to water defines a kind of haute bourgeois style. More than that, the mill villages suggest a complex layering of the past – the rebuilding of Slatersville into a “colonial” village, the adaptive reuse of mills in Valley Falls and Woonsocket for elderly housing, in Slatersville for apartments, in Whitensville for a community center, and the ongoing use of mill housing in Lonsdale, Berkeley,

Albion, Blackstone, Whitinsville, and Hopedale, among others. It is a resource of extraordinary richness and historical significance.

*Third:* The Blackstone Valley was, for a time, *the* center of technological innovation, diffusion, and convergence. The latter term may be the least understood. By convergence, I mean that the Valley's skilled textile machinists transferred their skill and their drive to innovate to higher value industries, such as the building of textile machines (Draper, Whitensville, Crompton & Knowles), of steam engines (Corliss and others), of machine tools (especially Brown & Sharpe) as well as locomotives and rifles. The list goes on and on. The Blackstone truly was the "Silicon Valley" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*Fourth:* As we approach closer to the possibility of a fishable river, a little aspect of the Blackstone's history will come further into focus. The river was the first site in the U. S. of intense political conflict over fishing rights. Like all Northeast rivers, the Blackstone, in the colonial period, witnessed extraordinary spring fish runs as salmon, shad, alewives, and other anadromous fish returned to their natal spawning grounds. Coming at the end of long New England winters, the spring fish runs were a welcome sight to natives and settlers alike – fresh fish for the taking, for eating and for the stockpiling of fertilizer. The small grist and sawmill dams presented little obstacle, and even if, on occasion, they did, millers lost little by opening or lowering their dams to accommodate their upstream neighbors. But all this changed with the coming of textile mills.

The dams grew larger, and they needed to be in use in all seasons. Not only did they obstruct the passage of fish, they created a fish pond now useful to commercial fisheries. Upcountry farmers petitioned the R. I. legislature demanding that their traditional rights be respected. The mill owners had too much influence, and *Salmo Salar*, the salmon, would not be seen on the river again.

But it may only be a matter of time before the movement to restore the salmon fishery of Maine extends further south. That movement, in alliance with boaters and environmentalists, led to the blowing up of the Edwards Dam on the Kennebec River in 1999, and salmon have returned. That was an act that also made clear that sport fishing was a more important part of the Maine economy than whatever potential hydropower the Edwards Dam might have produced.

In conclusion, and referring to the NPS's standards of national significance, the Blackstone Valley is 1) the premier example of a mill village corridor persisting from the 1790s to the 1930s; 2) fully expressive of such major historical themes as the rise of the factory system, the drama of succeeding waves of immigrants, an extraordinary center of technological innovation, diffusion, and convergence fully meriting the title, the "Silicon Valley" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; 3) a site of "superlative" public enjoyment with its new bike path, excursion train and boat rides, superb architecture, and the very real potential of a sport fishery ; and 4) an exceptional example of surviving mills, mill villages, raceways and gates, as well as portions of the Blackstone Canal. No other mill valley has similar historical integrity.

Gary Kulik

25Feb08